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DEMETRIUS III IN JUDEA*

Absence of sources is why we know little about the last kings of the Seleucid dynasty and their reigns. One exception is Demetrius III (97/96–88/87 BC), a son of Antiochus VIII Grypus.¹ What knowledge we have of him we owe to his role in the history of Judea at the end of Alexander Jannaeus' reign (103–86 BC). Josephus' historical works suggest that the king of Syria became involved in a conflict which broke out in Judea between Alexander Jannaeus and a group of his opponents led by the Pharisees. In doing so, he lent the latter his powerful military assistance. It proved so substantial that in a battle near Shechem Alexander Jannaeus' army was defeated. Only a lucky coincidence enabled him still to stay in power and soon to suppress his opposition (cf. Jos. *BJ* 1, 92–95; *AJ* 13, 376–379). This historical episode is exceptional in that Demetrius III was the first king of Syria since Antiochus VII Sidetes to stand on Judean soil and, at that, as an ally of one of local religious groups. It is this fact that makes the event worth looking at through the lens of not only the conflict between Alexander Jannaeus and the Pharisees, but also of Demetrius III's objectives in interfering in Judea's internal affairs.

A close study of Josephus' account of Demetrius III's involvement in Judea produces the impression that, despite its fairly comprehensive description of events, it contains some important gaps. First of all, it fails to present the circumstances and conditions of the Syrian king's alliance with the Pharisees. Both of these questions are of major importance for an understanding of this development, for the Syrian can hardly be supposed to have been disinterested in lending help to the Pharisees. His support must have come at the price of certain political commitments on their part, commitments weighty

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¹ Cf. Willrich 1901: 2801–2802, no. 42; Grainger 1997: 44; Hoover 2007b: 290–295; Ehling 2008: 232–234; Levenson/Martin 2009: 310–313. To this king scholars are usually attributing epithet Eukairos, even if Josephus is also calling him Akairos. Recently D.B. Levenson and Th.R. Martin (2009: 309, 313–322, esp. 336–337) after very detailed analysis of all available evidence related to this epithet of Demetrius III have concluded that it never had an official character, and it is best to abandon its use.

enough to persuade Demetrius III to gather a large force, no doubt a serious effort on his part.²

Scholars studying the history of the Seleucids are well familiar with events in Judea in the 2nd–1st centuries BC. Even so, it is worth outlining the situation in Judea and in Syria during the period in question. At the root of Alexander Jannaeus' conflict with the opposition lay a contention going back to late in John Hyrcanus' reign (133–104 BC). It was then that a religious group known as the Pharisees entered the political scene. Its leaders questioned John's right to hold political and religious power simultaneously, claiming that it was against Biblical tradition. The conflict stemmed from doubts about the purity of John Hyrcanus' descent, such „purity of descent” being required of persons holding the office of high priest of the Jerusalem temple (cf. Jos. *AJ* 13, 291–292).³ Members of the Hasmonean family who led the armed struggle of Judeans first against the Hellenistic religious reform under Antiochus IV (184–164 BC) and later for freedom from Syrian rule obtained such a right in 152 BC from the then king of Syria, Alexander Balas. The first Hasmonean to combine both offices in his hands was Jonathan (1 *Macc* 10: 20; Jos. *AJ* 13, 45).⁴ During the reign of Simon, his brother and successor, this privilege was confirmed by a vote of Hasmonean supporters representing various social groups, assembled in Jerusalem, and became law.⁵

Although John Hyrcanus succeeded in limiting the negative effects of Pharisee action, it still stirred doubts among some subjects, leading to increasing resentment toward the Hasmoneans. Skillfully played upon by the Pharisees, under Alexander Jannaeus this resentment led to years-long bloody civil war in which the king, commanding a disciplined army and mercenary units, inflicted heavy losses on his opponents (cf. Jos. *BJ* 1, 88–89; *AJ* 13, 372–374, 376). The conflict broke out at a time when he was especially active abroad as he was bent on conquering maritime cities and Transjordan, and involved in fighting the Nabateans, whose rising power posed a threat to Judea.⁶ The situation on foreign fronts had much impact on affairs back home. As long as the king was winning victories, he enjoyed sufficient popularity among subjects to maintain a clear advantage over the opposition. But when at the turn of the second decade of the 1st century BC he began to suffer bitter defeats from the Nabateans, his position was much weakened, while the opposition gained ground in society (cf. Jos. *BJ* 1, 89–92; *AJ* 13, 375–376). Opposition leaders, unable to achieve a decisive upper hand against the king, decided to seek help abroad and found an ally in Demetrius III (Jos. *BJ* 1, 92; *AJ* 13, 376).

² The data cited by Josephus on Demetrius III's numerical strength vary widely. In his *Antiquitates* (13, 377), he says that at Shechem, the Syrian king commanded 3,000 cavalry and 40,000 infantry, while in *Bellum* (1, 93) he makes mention of 3,000 horse and 14,000 foot in the same encounter. The latter figure seems more likely. Not impossibly, his *Antiquitates* contains a slip by the author on an error by a copyist.

³ For more on the roots and background of this conflict (with earlier bibliography), see: Dąbrowa 2010: 78–80, 142–143.

⁴ Cf. Dąbrowa 2010: 47–48 and note 23; 108.

⁵ 1 *Macc* 16: 41–46; Dąbrowa 2010: 109, 112–116.

⁶ See Jos. *BJ* 1, 86–87; *AJ* 13, 324, 356–364, 374–375. Much has been written about Alexander Jannaeus' political and military activity. The exact chronology of some of his campaigns and conquests is still the subject of discussion, cf. Stern 1981: 32–43; Kushnir-Stein 2000: 23–24; Hoover 2006: 25, 28–29; Dąbrowa 2010: 86–88 and note 14.

We could not say if the Pharisee leaders also considered other alliances. We can only surmise that in choosing an ally they were looking for its military capacities and its status on the political scene. What may give us a pause is that they did not decide to call on the Nabatean king Obodas I, who already had a record of defeating Alexander Jannaeus and who might have been willing to use an opportunity finally to eliminate his opponent once and for all. Perhaps the Nabateans' rapidly rising strength at the time caused the Pharisees to fear possible effects of their king's interference in Judean matters.⁷ Besides, the Nabateans were culturally alien to the Judeans. For this reason, Demetrius III might have appeared to them as the more predictable ally. He ascended to power in 97 with the help of king Ptolemy IX Lathyros of Egypt (Jos. *AJ* 13, 370).⁸ For the first few years of his reign, he controlled only a part of Syria, Damascus being his capital.⁹ The remaining part of the Seleucid state was then in the hands of his brother Philip I (Jos. *AJ* 13, 369, 371). Both brothers, amicable at first, at some point turned bitterly against each other. There are indications that in fighting his brother, Demetrius III was successful since he ended up controlling a large part of Syria, including Antioch.¹⁰ Demetrius III's position was therefore strengthened at the time when, in Judea, the conflict between Alexander Jannaeus and the Pharisees erupted into civil war.

We may speculate that the Pharisees were expecting Demetrius to help them regain their hold on the Jerusalem temple and thus control Judea's religious life. Josephus does not mention the price they were willing to pay for such assistance. Some light on this matter is thrown by a mention in an anonymous commentary (*peshet*) to the biblical book of the prophet Nahum which was found among Qumran papyri.¹¹ The moment the commentary was published, it caused debate among scholars regarding the identity of the king Demetrius mentioned there. At present, he is generally identified with Demetrius III.¹² Disputes also surrounded the meaning of the oft-used term „Seekers-

⁷ Cf. Jos. *AJ* 13, 391. For more on the Nabatean rise in political and military strength at the time, see Starcky 1966: 906–909; Lindner 1980: 53–57; Roschinski 1981: 14–17; Bowersock 1983: 22–25; Wenning 2007: 31–32.

⁸ The numismatic evidence proves that Demetrius III's reign began in 97/96 BC: Houghton/Spaer/Lorber 1998: no. 2825; Ehling 2008: 232; Hoover/Houghton/Vesely 2008: 328. Even if Josephus is giving wrong date of beginning of his reign there are some arguments which allow supposing that there were some political connections between Demetrius III and Ptolemy IX Lathyros: Ehling 2008: 239–240; cf. Hoover/Houghton/Vesely 2008: 315–316.

⁹ Newell 1939: 78–86; Houghton/Spaer/Lorber 1998: no. 2825–2867; Hoover 2007a: no. 799–805; Houghton/Lorber/Hoover 2008: no. 2450–2458 (= Hoover 2009: no. 1305–1307, 1309, 1311–1312, 1314–1315); Hoover/Houghton/Vesely 2008: 315, 328–334; Ehling 2008: 240–241.

¹⁰ Changes in Demetrius III's dominion within Syria may be inferred from the geography of mints producing coin in his name. His chief mint throughout his reign was that in Damascus. In the last years of his reign, coins bearing the name of Demetrius III were probably also produced in Tarsus (Hoover 2007a: no. 796; Houghton/Lorber/Hoover 2008: no. 2444 (= Hoover 2009, no. 1304), Seleucia Pieria (Houghton/Spaer/Lorber 1998: no. 2824; Hoover 2007a: no. 797–798; Houghton/Lorber/Hoover 2008: no. 2447–2449 (= Hoover 2009: no. 1308, 1310, 1313), and Antioch-on-the-Orontes: Houghton/Spaer/Lorber 1998: no. 2823; Hoover 2007b: 292–294; Houghton/Lorber/Hoover 2008: no. 2445–2446 (= Hoover 2009, no. 1302–1303); Ehling 2008: 245.

¹¹ 4Q169 = 4QpNah (= Charlesworth 2002b: 144–155).

¹² 4QpNah, fr. 3–4, col. 1, ll. 2–3: *Its interpretation concerns Demetrius, King of Greece, who sought to enter Jerusalem on the advice of the Seekers-After-Smooth-Things*. (transl. M.P. Horgan (= Charlesworth 2002b: 149)). Although different translations of the passage show some small variations, they do not affect its meaning, cf. Allegro 1956: 90; Amusin 1977: 135; Vermes 1998: 474; Doudna 2001: 759.

-After-Smooth-Things,” as the author describes those responsible for inviting Demetrius to Judea and whom he criticizes harshly. After prolonged disputes, scholars finally agreed that the description applied to the Pharisees.¹³ This being so, we may conclude that the Pharisees were ready to allow entry Demetrius III into Jerusalem in return for his help in removing Alexander Jannaeus.¹⁴ It would be difficult to suspect the anonymous author of Qumran, who, for ideological reasons, is strongly hostile to the Pharisees and may be unfair in his assessment, so that in his resentment he might have resorted to groundless accusations of such a disgraceful act against them. In this situation, it is rather to be thought that the matter was publicly known and was simply recorded by him. The readiness to surrender the city to Demetrius III shows with remarkable clarity how fierce the struggle was between Alexander Jannaeus and his opponents. In reality, it meant that the Pharisees agreed to the loss of Judean independence if only they could regain control of the Jerusalem temple.¹⁵ It is fully understandable why Josephus Flavius passed over this agreement in silence. Closely connected with the Pharisaic circle (Jos. *Vita* 12), even after some time he would not want to help show it in an unflattering light. The Pharisees’ intentions may also be interpreted in another way. Realizing how unstable Demetrius III’s position was, and counting on his prolonged involvement in dynastic struggles in Syria, they could offer him such attractive terms of alliance in hopes that, in any event, he would not be able fully to consume its fruits. It may be thought that the Pharisees considered a situation in which, with Alexander Jannaeus driven away, the Syrian king would be compelled to attend to his own state, so much so that real power in Judea would again land in their expectant hands.

Another matter worth exploring is what motives drove Demetrius III to side with the Pharisees and to risk an incursion into Judea. Although at that point the situation in Syria was fairly favorable for him, his own political status was none too stable. We know this from the events which happened directly after his intervention in Judea. As he was returning from his Judean expedition, he was forced to move toward Beroea to win it back from his brother Philip, who took advantage of the king’s absence to launch operations to win power in all of Syria. He was joined by local tribal leaders sympathizing with the Parthians. Confronted with action by a hostile coalition, Demetrius III soon lost power (Jos. *AJ* 13, 384).¹⁶ That Demetrius undertook the Judean expedition despite his unstable political situation suggests that he expected to achieve, with little difficulty, aims which would generously reward his effort in this enterprise. The ease with which he led his army all the way to Shechem indicates that his expectations were not unfounded. Another sign of his hopes for an easy victory was his conviction that

¹³ Cf. Allegro 1956: 92; Yadin 1971: 2, 12; Amusin 1977: 139–140; Doudna 2001: 632–634; Charlesworth 2002: 112–115; Wise 2003: 70, no. 9. That Demetrius was identified with Demetrius I by Rowley 1956: 188–191. Still, his is an isolated position, cf. Eshel 2008: 122–123 note 13.

¹⁴ The identification of the group referred to as „the Seekers-After-Smooth-Things” with the Pharisees has not raised much doubt among scholars since the publication of Nahum Peshier, cf. Allegro 1956: 92; Yadin 1971: 2, 12; Amusin 1977: 141–146; Schiffman 1993: 274–284; Tantlevskij 1996: 329–330 and note 4 (there earlier bibliography); Charlesworth 2002: 97–98; cf. VanderKam 2003: 466–467. Yet not all share this view, cf. Rowley 1956: 192; Saldarini 2001: 279–280; VanderKam 2003: 468–477.

¹⁵ Cf. Doudna 2001: 633.

¹⁶ See Hoover 2007b: 293–295; Ehling 2008: 245–246.

he could win the sympathies of foreign mercenaries engaged on the side of Alexander Jannaeus (cf. Jos. *BJ* 1, 93–94; *AJ* 13, 378), but their loyalty to the Judean king and their fierceness in combat cost him heavy losses on the battlefield. Nor did Demetrius expect to be abandoned, at a decisive moment of the campaign, by some of his Jewish allies (Jos. *BJ* 1, 95; *AJ* 13, 379).

In the light of what we know of Demetrius III's expedition to Judea, the information cited in the commentary to the Book of Nahum gains in credibility. We may conclude that Demetrius III considered his alliance with the Pharisees an excellent opportunity to regain dominion over Judea. Subjugating this land could give him important benefits toward his desired goals since its material and human resources could significantly contribute to his gaining complete control over Syria (Jos. *BJ* 1, 92). It should also be noted that the king's political plans must not be considered as separate from those of his predecessors, including his father Antiochus VIII. Syrian rulers never accepted the loss of Judea; indeed, they explicitly stated their desire to restore their dominion there and consistently took action to that end.¹⁷ Demetrius III's expedition to Judea was doubtless one of such efforts.¹⁸ Also, it was another expression of the Seleucids' continued refusal to recognize any rights demanded by lands once belonging to their empire to exercise political independence.¹⁹

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¹⁷ Antiochus VII Sidetes was the first, after Simon proclaimed Judean independence from the Seleucids, to come close to achieving this aim (cf. Dąbrowa 2010: 67–69). An expedition against John Hyrcanus was contemplated by Demetrius II (Jos. *AJ* 13, 267) and Antiochus VIII Grypus (Jos. *AJ* 13, 270). Antiochus IX Cyzicenus fought against John Hyrcanus for control over strategically important Samaria, cf. Dąbrowa 2007: 453–458.

¹⁸ Just so is this expedition interpreted by scholars, cf. Willrich 1901: 2902; Bevan 1902, II: 260–261; Bouché-Leclercq 1913/14: 422–424; Schürer 1985: 288–289.

¹⁹ Cf. Dąbrowa 2004: 67–68, 80–82.

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